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Myth 8: The “Patch-On” Approach to Programming Is Effective

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Thinking about “patches” evokes images of holes in garments, blankets, or furniture covered by fabric that may or may not quite match the original cloth and that is whipstitched or glued on. Alternatively, patching a tire comes to mind. In both instances, the patch is likely to be temporary, a cover-up measure designed to ward off some sort of “failure” of an object. At best, one might think of a patchwork quilt that uses odd bits of remnants to make a covering. The good ones take a lot of time to make and can be “interesting” but only rarely result in what is considered to be art.

It is not likely that any group of educators of the gifted ever sat around a table and came to the decision that a “patch-on” approach to programming for bright learners represented best practice. Nonetheless, it is as common today as 25 years ago that programming for students identified as gifted often represents such an approach. By default rather than by design, it is also as likely as at any time in the past that this avenue reflects an attempt to cover a hole in the original fabric of schoolwide planning or a patchwork of mismatched and incoherent elements cobbled together with misguided intent to address the learning needs of a group of students.

Patch-on programs can be a response to torn or weak fabric at one or both of two levels.

First, such programs may be an add-on in terms of being tangential rather than integral to the work of the school as a whole. In these instances, the program itself may (or may not) be fundamentally sound, but it is of interest and concern to few people other than those directly involved with its operation. When times are difficult in school—and they often are—such programs are expendable. Furthermore, seeing to the growth and success of students in the program is often seen as belonging only to specialized program personnel. An evident result is that too few classroom teachers are prepared to provide high-end challenge on a systematic basis. In schools where

programs for gifted learners are patch-ons, it is the job of the teacher in the resource room to provide challenge. Second, programs can be “patch-ons” in terms of their internal consistency. In other words, program elements don’t align with one another. The program lacks coherent design. Either kind of “patch-on” falls short of quality educational practice. It appears that many programs for students identified as gifted are “patchy” on both levels.

Patch-on approaches to programming for gifted learners result in some of the following:

- *The program is not really a program.* That is, it does not have articulated elements such as a specified philosophy, clear and appropriate goals or outcomes, a plan for professional development to support those who have responsibilities for carrying out the program, a defined and coherent curriculum, and mechanisms for ongoing formative and summative evaluation of program processes and outcomes.
- *The program is largely or completely detached from regular classroom goals.* In other words, rather than being an extension of content that is deemed important for students, the gifted program is an “extra.” In many cases, in fact, programs intentionally steer clear of classroom content so as not to annoy classroom teachers.
- *There is a mismatch between who is taught, what is taught, and how it is taught.* For example, program documents may note that giftedness is multifaceted and is found in all aspects of human endeavor and in all populations. Students may be identified, however, based solely on reading and math achievement scores.

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Curriculum may stress neither math nor reading capacities but emphasize creative thinking. Such misalignment is common and resembles nothing so much as a poorly crafted patchwork quilt.

- *Communications are weak or lacking between the program for gifted learners and other elements of the general school program.* For example, there is little or no consistent communication about student needs and outcomes between specialized portions of the program for gifted students and regular classroom teachers, media and technology services, special education or second language learner personnel, guidance personnel, and so on.
- *Program content resembles a patchwork quilt.* In second grade, students “do animals,” in third grade it is Egypt and pyramids, in fourth grade it is on to astronomy. In fifth grade, the students “do critical thinking” and so on. A student is not likely to experience a coherent scope and sequence of content and skills across the grades.
- *Program content changes with the teacher.* That is, if Mr. Jackson who is the “g/t teacher” is passionate about archeology, that is what students in the program are likely to study. If he leaves the program, the next teacher will determine the nature and contents of the class.
- *The program is “effective” if students like it.* There is no systematic way of assessing whether the program is addressing learning needs of its students other than “the happiness” factor—and no systematic means of examining positive and negative and intended and unintended impacts of the program on the school as a whole. The program is deemed successful if program teachers, participants, and parents of participants are pleased.

Some of these attributes suggest a program that is a school add-on rather than one that is central to the mission of the school. As long as the attributes persist, ownership of school outcomes for students in the program is likely to be ambiguous, contentious, or both. Some of the attributes typify programs that remain loosely coupled. As long as either shortcoming continues, it is unlikely that the program will reflect best educational practices in general or best practices for high-ability learners in particular.

A constructive way of considering and addressing the current health of programming for gifted learners, in general or in a particular setting, is to delineate some elements of coherent, defensible, and integrated

approaches to planning programs for gifted learners that are pivotal parts of the school mission to address the learning needs of each student and that are constructed in such a way that the various program elements work harmoniously toward worthy ends. Using the following questions as a guide, educators can both diagnose the status of their programs and take action to ensure their continued viability and growth.

1. Is there a statement of philosophy that provides a rationale for the program and clearly articulated program goals that emanate from the statement of philosophy?
2. Do the program philosophy and goals stem from and extend the school’s mission and goals?
3. Was the program developed with broad input from a wide range of school personnel who continue to provide input regarding program operation?
4. Is the program constructed and operated in such a way that many school personnel have designated roles and responsibilities for the growth and success of students identified as gifted?
5. Is the regular classroom seen pervasively as a central element in the program for students identified as gifted?
6. Are elements of the regular classroom curriculum designed to be catalysts for identifying and addressing student potential?
7. Are there working channels of communication between the program and each other key element in the school so that information is easily exchanged to promote collaboration on behalf of students in the program?
8. Do identification procedures effectively align with the school’s mission, with the nature of the school population, and with the program’s philosophy and goals?
9. Does specialized program curriculum align with identification procedures and with school and program philosophy?
10. Does program curriculum reflect the nature and needs of the full population of high-ability and high-potential students in the school?
11. Is the specialized program curriculum designed to augment and extend school and classroom learning goals?
12. Is there an articulated scope and sequence of content, process, and product goals for high-ability and high-potential learners that can be used to guide all learning experiences for these students in both regular classroom and specialized settings?

13. Are there rubrics or other indicators of quality performance that guide teachers and students in moving progressively toward expertise in the disciplines and in student's particular talent areas?
14. Does professional development consistently support teachers in understanding how to recognize, develop, and extend challenge?
15. Does professional development lead to fruitful collaboration between classroom and program teachers and to fluid movement of students and student work between the regular classroom and specialized program learning opportunities?
16. Is the program regularly evaluated formatively and summatively and by appropriate internal and external evaluators to inform program content and process and to ensure maximum benefit to students?
17. Are evaluation results consistently shared with a wide range of stakeholders to enable their input related to programming decisions?

There is, of course, no such thing as a perfect program nor is it reasonable to assume any program could offer an exemplary response to all the questions above. Nonetheless, leaders of high-quality programs persistently aspire to create a sturdy fabric both in terms of program integration with the school and in regard to alignment of elements within the program itself. To work toward a lesser goal is to perpetuate the myth that "patch-on" approaches to programming are effective.

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